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Senate

CONTRIBUTIONS OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARMY ENGINEERS TO THE STATE OF ALASKA

Mr. SULLIVAN. Mr. President, today I wish to recognize the immense contributions of the African-American community to my State of Alaska and to our great Nation.

I want to highlight in particular a contingent of troops, members of the African-American Army Engineers, who were stationed in Alaska during World War II, hundreds of men who served our Nation at a time when their basic human rights were being denied, some 6 years before the military was desegregated. In spite of that despicable injustice, they exhibited a great love for this country, even a willingness to die for this country.

These soldiers were stationed in Alaska among several regiments assigned to build the ALCAN—Alaska-Canada—Highway. For a State as big and diverse as Alaska, infrastructure is critically important to the well-being of our communities. And in the 1940s, infrastructure assets—roads, bridges, ports—were few and far between. In fact, there was no road linking the contiguous United States to Alaska through Canada. We were isolated.

We think of construction projects today, the many tools and machines our hard-working

crews have at their disposal. But back then, many of those technologies and advancements didn't exist, making this enormous undertaking all the more daunting. Worse still, the machinery that was available was often given to the all-White units, leaving the African-American servicemembers ill-equipped. Nonetheless, the men of the African-American Army Engineers labored on under extreme weather conditions, creating a roughly 1,700 mile cross-continental corridor in a mere 8 months.

The project, too, came at a time when our Nation was under imminent threat in the Pacific, just 2 months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Our country needed to get supplies and soldiers to the furthest stretches of U.S. territory. Without the ALCAN, Alaska would not be the cornerstone of our national defense in the Pacific and the Arctic, nor the prosperous land of opportunity we see today.

For these enormous contributions and for their selfless service to our country, we thank the thousands of African-American servicemembers who for too long were dismissed and overlooked.